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Amaranth farming... Rural sustainable livelihood of the future?

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Introduction

The rural areas of Mexico are home to 60.7% of the country's extreme poor. The rural poor live mainly in the central and southern regions of Mexico. These regions witness massive migration, economic instability, and environmental degradation. Most of the children from 0-5 years old living there are undernourished. The majority of the Mexican amaranth farmers live in these regions. 30 years ago amaranth was suggested as an alternative crop by the Food and Agriculture Organization to combat poverty and undernourishment. Still, small – scale Mexican farmers and their children are suffering from these problems.

This study explores: **What are the possibilities and limitations that small-scale farmers in Mexico are facing to enhance sustainable livelihoods in the amaranth value chain?**

Methods

The study is based on the Sustainable Livelihoods approach, Value Chain and Clusters theories. On that framework we constructed the analytical model shown in Figure 1

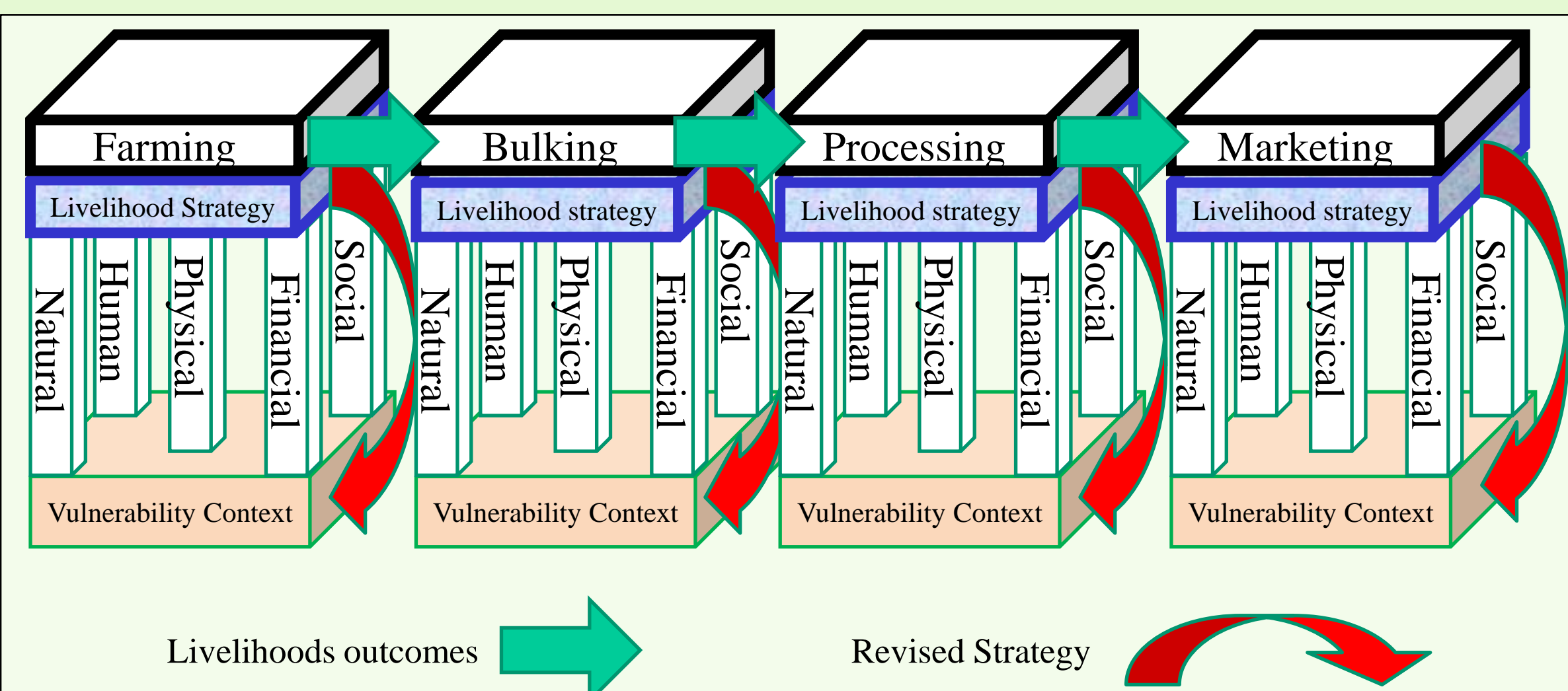


Fig. 1: Schematic links in a value chain based on sustainability dimensions (social, physical, financial, human and natural capitals)

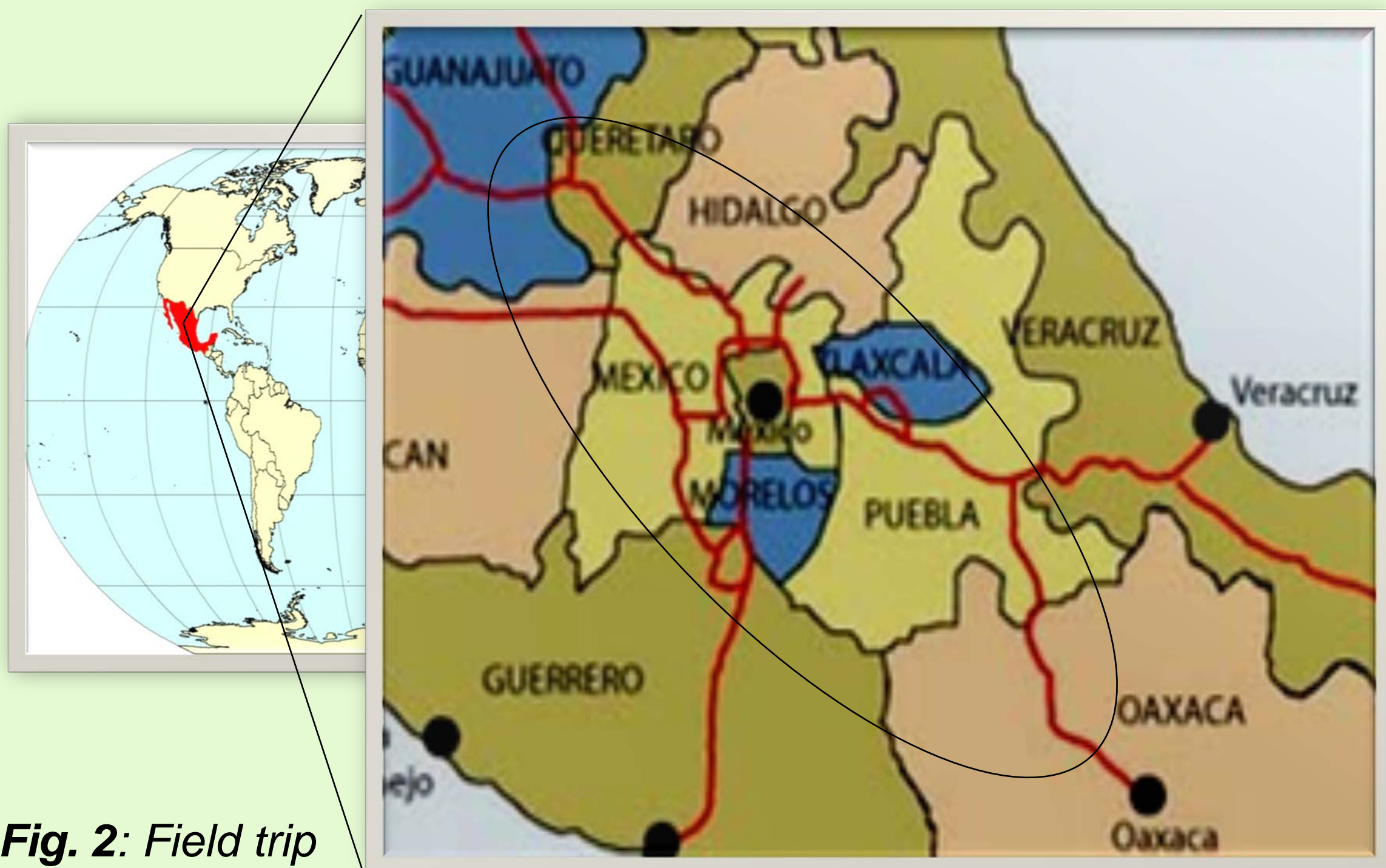


Fig. 2: Field trip

We conducted 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Six of them were conducted with small-scale farmers and other actors involved in the *whole* Mexican amaranth value chain. In Europe we interviewed representatives ranging from whole dealers, the Coffee Club (a Danish fair trade consumer association) and CARITAS Denmark.

Results

Main possibilities:

- plentiful amaranth varieties
- valuable indigenous knowledge
 - varieties and soils
- nutritional properties
 - non gluten, squalene
- environmental potential
 - tolerates saline and dry soils
- ideal as organic and fair trade product

"The knowledge about irrigation, certification, technology, processing, marketing, and export, is centralized and distributed unevenly"

Main limitations:

"We are not associated with any organization". "We do not trust associations any more". "We never really got anything from them anyway"



"Our agriculture programmes only give financial support to amaranth manufacturing and marketing"

"Our cooperative is formed by **non-farmer** members, we are all professionals with specific knowledge about amaranth seeds, growing cuttings, manufacturing and sale of amaranth products"...

"Associated farmers have their own cooperatives and are only capable of making decisions at the farming level"

"There is not enough amaranth to sustain large manufactures" "20 years ago we used to come together and share experience, today there is almost no sharing of experience" "There is limited diversification of amaranth based products"



Conclusions

Initiatives (from fair trade consumer associations) that support and demand the active participation of small scale farmers in the cooperatives are vital for ensuring a more fair distribution of capitals (physical, social, financial, natural and human). Especially the distribution of *knowledge* showed to be essential for increasing the yield of amaranth. The monopolistic practices favoured by the cooperatives in the amaranth value chain (covering bulking, processing, marketing and export) are actually setting the strongest barriers for expanding the amaranth production and for furthering a sustainable livelihood for small-scale farmers. The Mexican government could play a more active role by supporting more effectively small-scale farmers' role in the value chain as real partners or co-owners in the cooperatives. Supporting the whole value chain, *from farming* to the final consumers and not only the manufacturing process, is vital for furthering sustainable livelihood in amaranth farming.